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Nicaragua rebellion ever more in the open

By L.A. Jolidon
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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — The CIA-backed "secret war," pitting Nicaraguan exiles and Miskito Indians against the Sandinista regime in Managua, is less secret all the time.

CIA agents also monitor rebel incursions from bases inside Honduras, but officials here routinely deny the existence of the contras' camps.

"I haven't seen them," a Honduran politician said nervously.

Leaders of the FDN (National Democratic Front), the largest contra force, are a common sight — along with U.S. military and intelligence personnel — at the Hotel Maya here.

FDN president and commander-in-chief Adolfo Calero ticks off the names of towns "occupied," numbers of arms captured and skirmishes won. He also says Sandinista casualties far exceed fallen rebels.

"They can't stop our incursions," he says, "or those of (Eden) Pastora," commander of another rebel force based in Costa Rica. "They can't push us out or eliminate us. We're hurting them, and badly."

Counting Pastora's troops and several thousand "Misuras," Miskito Indians who have taken up arms against the Sandinistas, the anti-Sandinista rebels total about 15,000. Current CIA strategy reportedly calls for increasing the strength to 18,000. Pastora, or "Commander Zero," heads the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance, or ARDE for its Spanish initials, which operates along the border with Costa Rica.

U.S. policy-makers argue the rebels pressure Nicaragua's junta to expel Cuban advisers, hold free elections and halt support for leftist insurgents in El Salvador.

While the U.S. administration denies it seeks to overthrow the Sandinista regime, Calero, a University of Notre Dame law graduate, and other rebel leaders don't mask their intentions.

Bright blue-and-white bumper stickers given to visitors at FDN headquarters here read:

"1983: Grenada.

1984: Nicaragua."